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Welcome to the Civilization of the Liar's Paradox

Slavoj Žižek uncovers political paradoxes of lying.

The so-called Liar Paradox – statements like 'everything I say is false' – has been endlessly debated by philosophers from Ancient Greece and India to the twentieth century. The paradox is that if this statement is true then it is false (everything I say is *not* false), and *vice versa*. Instead of getting lost in the endless network of arguments and counter-arguments, I will turn to Jacques Lacan (1901-81), who offers a unique solution by way of distinguishing between the *content* of an enunciation and the *subjective stance* implied by this enunciation: between the content of what you are saying and the stance implied by what you are saying. The moment we introduce this distinction, we immediately see that a statement like 'everything I say is false' can itself be true or false. 'I am always lying' can either correctly or incorrectly render the subjective experience of my entire existence as inauthentic, a fake. However, the opposite also holds: the statement 'I know I am a piece of shit' can in itself be true in its content, but false at the level of the subjective stance it pretends to render, since even saying it implies that I somehow demonstrate that I am NOT fully 'a piece of shit' – that I am at least honest about myself… But our reply to this should be a paraphrase of the well-known Groucho Marx line: "You act like a piece of shit and admit that you are a piece of shit, but this will not deceive us – you *are* a piece of shit!"

Why lose time with such endlessly debated paradoxes? Because in our 'post-truth' era of Rightist populism, the practice of relying on this paradox has reached its

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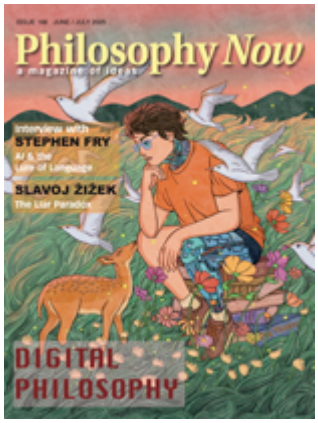

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extreme. So today's political discourse cannot be understood without the distinction between the enunciation and the enunciated.

Let's jump *in medias res* [Latin for 'in the midst of things', Ed]. After Trump was reelected in 2024, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who retained her seat in Congress) publicly appealed to those of her voters who also voted for Trump to explain why they made such a strange and inconsistent vote. She was told that the predominant reason was that compared with the manipulative calculations of Kamala Harris and other Democrats, she and Trump both appeared more sincere. This is also why, when Trump is caught in inconsistencies or outright lying, such disclosures only help him: his partisans take even his lies as a proof that he acts like a normal human being who does not just rely on his expert advisers but bluntly speaks his mind. In our terms, the very inconsistencies and lies in the enunciated content of Trump's statements function as a sign that, at the level of the enunciation's stance, Trump speaks as an authentic and sincere human being. This proves that the implied stance of enunciation can also be a fake.

Strategic Lying

Subjective truth is opposed to factual truth in a way similar to the opposition between hysteria and obsessional neurosis: the first one is a truth in the guise of a lie, and the second one a lie in the guise of truth. A hysteric tells the truth in the guise of a lie in that what is said is not literally true, but the lie expresses in a false form an authentic complaint; while what an obsessional neurotic claims *is* literally true, but it is a truth which serves a lie.

Today, both Rightist populists and liberal-Leftist advocates of Political Correctness practice these two complementary forms of lying. First, both groups resort to factual lies when these lies serve what they perceive as the higher Truth of their Cause. For instance, some religious fundamentalists advocate 'lying for Jesus': in order to prevent the horrible crime of abortion, say, one is allowed to propagate false scientific 'truths' about fetuses and the medical dangers of abortion; or, in order to support breast-feeding, one is allowed to present as a scientific fact that abstention from breast-feeding causes breast-cancer. Anti-immigrant populists shamelessly circulate non-verified stories about rapes and other crimes by refugees in order to give credibility to their 'insight' that refugees pose a threat to 'our way of life'. All too often, PC liberals proceed in a similar way for the opposite purpose: they pass in silence over actual differences between the ways of life of refugees and Europeans, since mentioning them might be seen as promoting Eurocentrism. And recall the case of Rotherham in the UK where, a decade or so ago, police discovered that a gang of Pakistani youths had been systematically grooming then raping over a thousand poor white young girls: the data were initially ignored or downplayed in order not to trigger Islamophobia.

The opposite strategy is also widely practiced on both poles. Anti-immigrant populists not only propagate factual lies, but also cunningly use bits of factual truth to add the aura of veracity to their racist lies; and PC partisans also practice this lying with truth in their fight against racism and sexism; they mostly quote checkable facts, but often give them a wrong twist. The populist Right displaces onto an external enemy their authentic frustration and sense of loss, while the PC Left uses its true points (detecting sexism and racism in language) to re-assert its moral superiority (and thus prevent true social-economic change). The supreme irony is here that the populist Right practices historicist relativism much more

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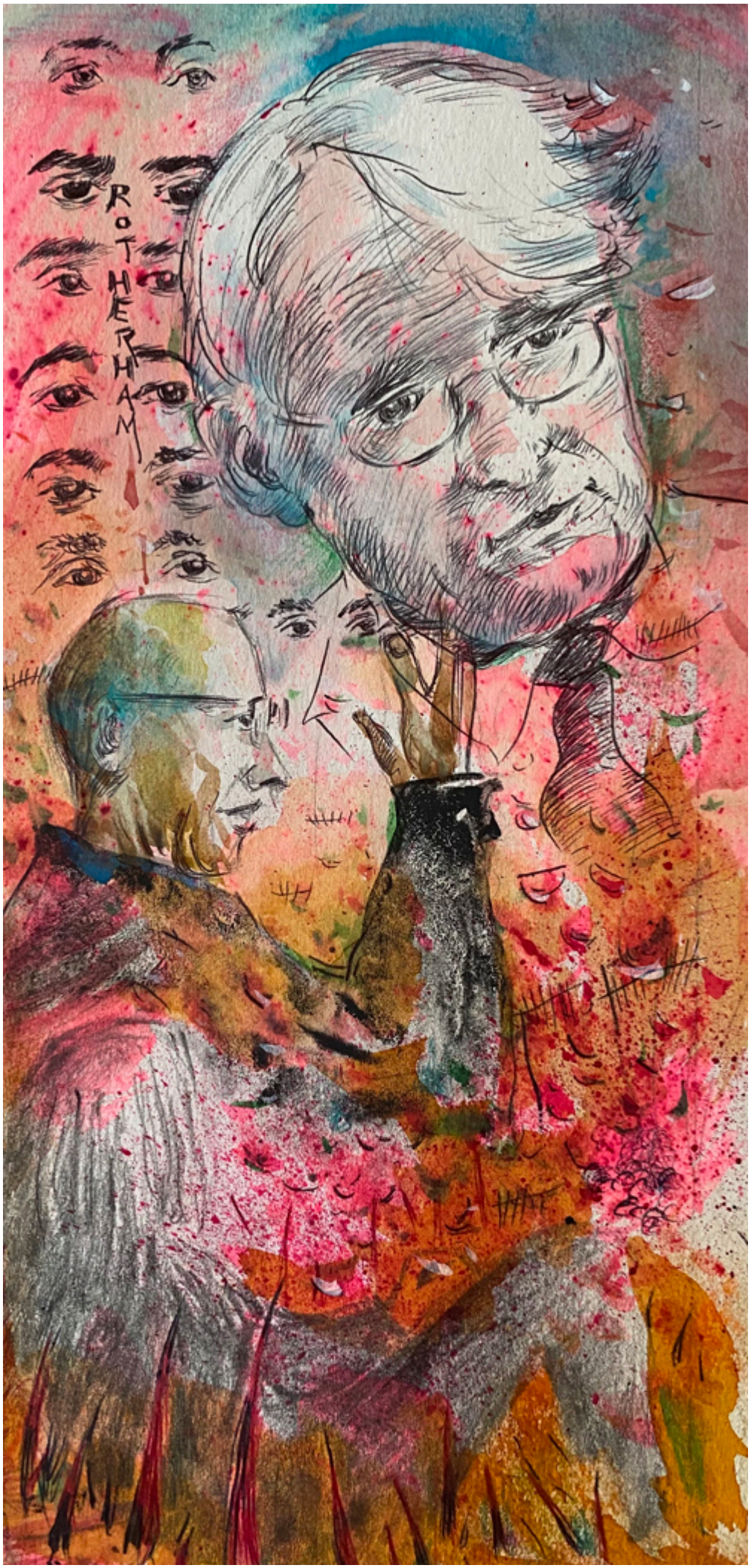
brutally than the Left, even though they condemn it in their theory (if their self-justification deserves that word). However, the correct stance is not simply to stick to the factual truth: in some sense, there *are* 'alternate facts' – although not, of course, in the sense that the Holocaust did or did not happen. (Incidentally, all Holocaust-revisionists that I know of, from David Irving on, claim to be verifying data in a strict empirical way – none of them evokes postmodern relativism!)

Data present a vast and impenetrable domain, and we always approach them from what hermeneutics calls a certain 'horizon of understanding', privileging some data and omitting others. All our histories are precisely that – stories – which is to say, combinations of selected data into consistent narratives, rather than photographic reproductions of reality. For example, an anti-Semitic historian could easily write an overview of the role of Jews in the social life of Germany in the 1920s, pointing out how entire professions (lawyers, journalists, artists) were numerically dominated by Jews – all more or less true, but clearly in the service of a lie. The most efficient lies are lies with truth – and especially lies which reproduce only factual data.

Take the history of a country: one can tell it from a political standpoint, focusing on the vagaries of political power; or one can focus on economic development; on ideological struggles; on popular misery and protest… each of these approaches could be factually accurate – but they are not 'true' in the same emphatic sense. There is nothing 'relativist' about the fact that human history is always told from a certain standpoint, sustained by certain ideological interests. The difficult thing is to show how these interested standpoints are not all equally true – some are more 'truthful' than others. For example, if one tells the story of Nazi Germany from the standpoint of the suffering of those oppressed by it – that is, if we are led in our telling by an interest in universal human emancipation – this is not just a matter of a different subjective standpoint: such a telling of history is immanently 'more true', since it describes more adequately the dynamics of the social totality which gave birth to Nazism. All 'subjective interests' are not the same, not only because some are ethically preferable to others, but also because 'subjective interests' do not stand outside social totality, but are themselves moments of social totality, formed by active (or passive) participants in social processes. That's why there is no 'neutral' or 'objective' reporting on the Middle East war, nor on the Russian aggression against Ukraine: one can tell the truth about it only from the engaged standpoint of a victim. The title of Jürgen Habermas's early masterpiece *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) is today perhaps more apt than ever.


ROTHERHAM

Jürgen Habermas and Mladen Dolar by Venantius J. Pinto

Passive & Active Lying

To further elaborate this dimension, we should mobilize another notion which plays a crucial role in the analysis of today's ideology: the notion of *interpassivity*, introduced by Robert Pfaller.

Interpassivity is the opposite of Hegel's notion of *List der Vernunft* (the 'cunning of Reason'), in which *I am active through the other*: Hegel's notion is that can remain passive, sitting comfortably in the background, while the Other does it for me. Instead of hitting the metal with a hammer, the machine can do it for me; instead of turning the mill myself, water can do it. Here I achieve my goal by way of interposing between me and the object on which I work another natural object. But the same can happen at the interpersonal level. Instead of directly attacking my enemy, I can instigate a fight between him and another person, so that I can comfortably watch the two of them destroying each other.

In the case of interpassivity, on the contrary, *I am passive through the other*: I concede to the other the passive aspect – the enjoying – of my experience, while I myself remain actively engaged: I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR passively enjoys the TV for me; I can make financial arrangements for the deceased's fortune while the weepers mourn.

This brings us to the notion of *false activity*: people not only act in order to change something, they can also act in order to prevent something happening, so that nothing will change. Therein resides the typical strategy of the obsessional neurotic: he is frantically active in order to prevent the real thing from happening. Say, in a group situation in which some tension threatens to explode, the obsessional talks all the time in order to prevent the awkward moment of silence which would compel the participants to openly confront the underlying tension. Similarly, in psychoanalytic treatment, obsessional neurotics talk constantly, overflowing the analyst with anecdotes, dreams, insights. This incessant activity is sustained by the underlying fear that if they stop talking for a moment, the analyst will ask them the question that truly matters. In other words, they talk in order to keep the analyst immobile. Even in much of today's progressive politics, the danger is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to be active and to participate, even if unproductively. People intervene all the time, attempting to 'do something,' academics participate in meaningless debates; the truly difficult thing is to step back and to withdraw from it. Those in power often prefer even a *critical* participation to silence – to engage us in a dialogue just to make it sure our ominous passivity is broken. The endless emphasis on the necessity to act, to do something, often betrays the subjective stance of *not doing anything*. The more we talk about the impending ecological catastrophe, the less we are ready to do.

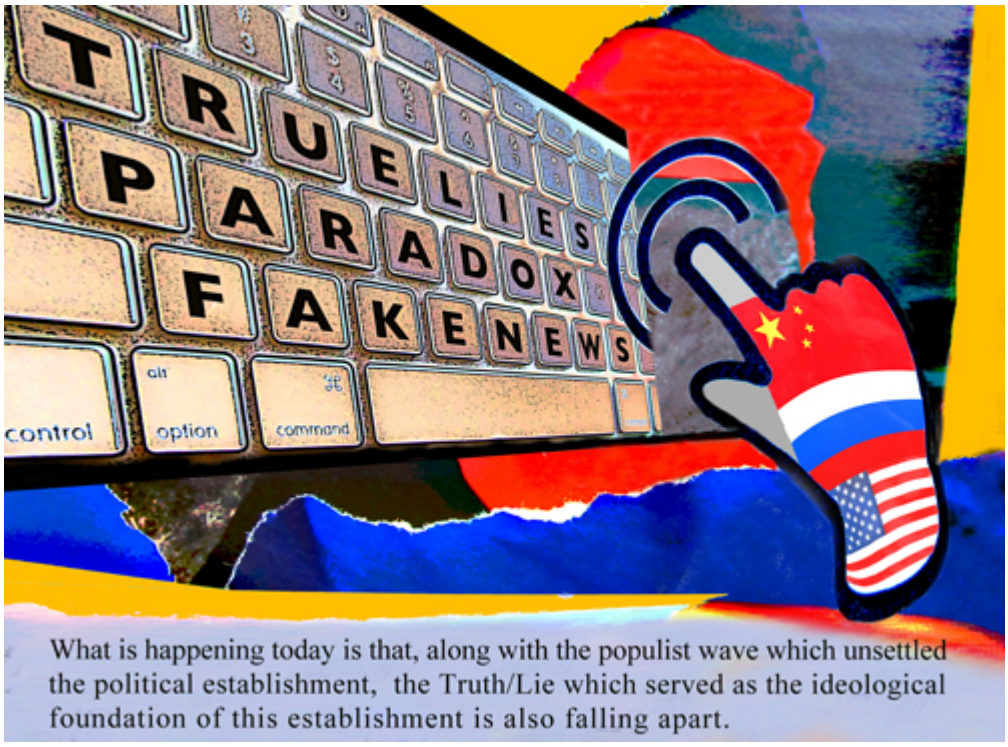
Against such an interpassive mode, in which we are active all the time to ensure that nothing will really change, the first truly critical step in opposing it is to *withdraw into passivity* and refuse to participate. This first step clears the ground for a *true activity* – for an act that will effectively change the coordinates of the constellation.

Things get even more complex with the process of apologizing. If I hurt someone with a rude remark, the proper thing for me to do is to offer him a sincere apology; and the proper thing for him to then do is to say something like, "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I wasn't offended, I knew you didn't mean it, so you really owe me no apology!" The point is, of course, that although the final result is that no apology is needed, one has to go through the entire process of offering it: 'you owe me no apology' can only be said after I do offer an apology. So although formally nothing happens – the offer of apology is proclaimed unnecessary – there is a gain at the end of the process: perhaps, even, the friendship is saved. An apology succeeds precisely through being proclaimed superfluous. A similar strategy is at work in apologizing when a quick admission can serve as an excuse to avoid a real apology ("I said I'm sorry, so shut up and stop annoying me!").

The Chinese Communist Party (among many other political agents) provided a similar model of manipulating the gap between enunciated and enunciation. It learned the lesson of Gorbachev's failure: that full public recognition of the 'founding crimes' of the regime will only bring the entire system down. Those crimes thus have to remain unacknowledged. True, some Maoist 'excesses' and 'errors' are denounced (the Great Leap Forward and the devastating famine that followed; the Cultural Revolution), and Deng's assessment of Mao's role as 70% positive, 30% negative, is enshrined as the official formula. But this assessment deliberately functions as a formal conclusion which renders any further elaboration superfluous: even though Mao was 30% bad, the full symbolic impact of this admission is neutralized, so that he can continue to be celebrated as the founding father of the nation, his body in a mausoleum and his image on every banknote.

We are dealing here with a clear case of fetishistic disavowal: although we know very well that Mao made massive errors and caused immense suffering, his figure is kept magically untainted by these facts. In this way, the Chinese Communists can have their cake and eat it, and the radical changes brought about by economic liberalization can be combined with the continuation of the same Party rule as before.

The procedure is here that of neutralization (or, rather, what Freud called *Isolierung* – 'insulation'): you admit horrible things, but you prohibit all subjective reactions to it (horror at what went on). Millions of dead become a neutral fact. When, today, Israeli (and some Western) media report on the destruction of Gaza, do they not practice a similar neutralization? Hamas terrorists torture and kill, while the victims of IDF are just liquidated or annihilated…


TRUE LIES
PARADOX
FAKE NEWS
control
option
command
What is happening today is that, along with the populist wave which unsettled the political establishment, the Truth/Lie which served as the ideological foundation of this establishment is also falling apart.

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Rumours & Lies

Then there are rumours, which function in a strange way with regard to truth: the factual truth of a rumour is suspended, or, rather, treated as immaterial ("I don't know if it is true, but this is what I heard…"), while the content of the rumour retains its full symbolic efficiency – we enjoy it, retelling it with passion (I rely here on *Rumours*, by Mladen Dolar, 2024). So it's not the same as the fetishist disavowal, which is more like, "I know very well it's not true, but nonetheless, I believe in it", but, rather its inversion – something like, "I cannot say that I believe this is true, this really happened; but nonetheless, here's what I know."

With regard to the exercise of power, the space of rumours is ambiguous. 'Dirty' rumours can sustain power and its authority (from Ataturk to Tito); but rumours also play an often decisive role in unrests and upheavals, including anti-immigrant riots (as mentioned, Europe is now full of rumours of immigrants raping our women, and of how authorities censor news about these rapes). There are also what one may be tempted to call 'good rumours' – those which are needed to trigger a revolutionary explosion, say. An historical example is the Great Fear (*la Grande Peur*), the general panic that took place between 17th July and 3rd August 1789 at the start of the French Revolution.

I cannot resist adding to this list a unique case from cinema history. A tension between a Communist political commitment and a fascination with the 'incestuous Thing' characterizes the unique cinematic work of Luchino Visconti. In his movies the incestuous Thing has its own political weight; it is the decadent *jouissance*, or pleasure-in-pain, of the old ruling classes in decay. The two supreme examples of this deadly fascination are the obvious *Death in Venice* (1971), and the less known, but much better, earlier black-and-white masterpiece *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa* (or in English, *Sandra*, 1965), a chamber cinema gem. What both films share is not only a prohibited passion which ends in death (the composer's passion for the beautiful boy in *Venice*, the incestuous passion of brother and

sister in *Vaghe stelle*); but also, in both cases, the duality of the artist's Leftist political commitment (up to his death, Visconti was a member of the Italian Communist Party) and his fascination with the decadent *jouissance* of the ruling class in decay. This functions here as a simple split between enunciated and enunciation, as if Visconti, in the best mode of prudish puritanical revolutionaries, publicly condemns what he personally enjoys and is fascinated with, so that his very public endorsement of the necessity to abolish the reign of the old ruling class is 'trans-functionalized' into an instrument of providing decadent pleasure-in-pain, in the spectacle of one's own decay. Does the same not hold even for dystopias like *The Handmaid's Tale* ? Are we not secretly fascinated by its detailed descriptions of the oppression of women – which we, of course, all condemn?

Rumours seem to fit perfectly today's predicament, which many people characterize as 'the death of truth' – a characterization which is obviously wrong. The implication of those who use this term is that previously (say, until the 1980s), in spite of all manipulations and distortions, truth *did* somehow prevail, so that the 'death of truth' is a relatively recent phenomenon. But a quick overview tells us that this was not the case: how many violations of human rights and humanitarian catastrophes remained invisible, from the Vietnam war to the invasion of Iraq? Just remember the times of Reagan, Nixon, Bush… The difference was not that the past was more 'truthful', but that the ideological hegemony was much stronger, so that, instead of today's greater melee of local 'truths,' one 'truth' (or, rather, one big Lie) basically prevailed. In the West, this was the *liberal-democratic Truth* (with a Leftist or Rightist twist). What is happening today is that, with the populist wave which unsettled the political establishment, the Truth/Lie which served as the ideological foundation of this establishment is also falling apart. And the ultimate reason for this disintegration is not the rise of postmodern relativism, but the failure of the ruling establishment in being no longer able to maintain its ideological hegemony.

We can now see what those who bemoan the 'death of truth' really deplore: the disintegration of one big Story more or less accepted by the majority which brought ideological stability to a society. The secret of those who curse 'historicist relativism' is that they miss the safe situation in which one big Truth (even if it was a big Lie) provided the basic 'cognitive mapping' for all. In short, it is those who deplore the 'death of truth' who are the true and most radical agents of this death: their implicit motto is the one attributed to Goethe, "*besser Unrecht als Unordnung*" – better injustice than disorder – meaning, better one big Lie than the reality of a mixture of lies and truths.

So when we hear claims that with the ongoing 'collapse of the information ecosystem' our society is falling apart, we should be very clear about what these claims mean: not just that fake news abounds, but that the Big Lie that until now held together our social space is disintegrating. The 'death of truth' thus opens up the possibility for a new authentic truth… or for an even worse big Lie. Is this not happening today with the retreat of liberal democracy, which is step by step being overshadowed by multiple figures of the new Fascism, from neo-feudal populism, to religious authoritarianism?

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